DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 371 548 EC 303 136

AUTHOR Mendaglio, Sal; Tillier, William
TITLE Feeling Bad Can Be Good: Using Dabrowski's Theory To Reframe Gifted Children's Adjustment Difficulties.
PUB DATE Sep 92
NOTE 8p.; In: Images in Transition; see EC 303 125.
PUF TYPE Information Analyses (070) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Counseling Psychology; *Counseling Theories; Elementary Secondary Education; *Emotional Adjustment; *Emotional Development; Emotional Problems; Foreign Countries; *Gifted; *Individual Development; Psychological Patterns; Psychology; Self Evaluation (Individuals)
IDENTIFIERS Dabrowski (Kazimierz); *Positive Disintegration Theory

ABSTRACT

Kazimierz Dabrowski's theory of positive disintegration is applied to counseling gifted students having emotional and adjustment problems. According to the theory, a central feature of psychological growth is a series of disintegrations--progressive contradictions and conflicts that arise from a person's experience of life. Such conflicts and disintegrations become a fundamental, inevitable, and positive component of development. Dabrowski sees over-excitability as one critical aspect of developmental potential, including psychomotor, sensual, intellectual, imaginational, and emotional over-excitability. Dabrowski outlines five levels in the process of psychological development from the social integrated self of Level 1 through varying degrees of disintegration to a second functional integration comprised of a critically thinking, autonomous self governed by authentic emotions. Gifted students possess strong intrinsic developmental potential and exhibit the over-excitability, conflicts, disintegrations, and reintegrations of advanced development. Dabrowski's theory advocates an individualized educational approach utilizing a developmental counseling perspective. (Contains 10 references.) (DB)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

PROCEEDINGS - SAGE 1992 / 6TH CANADIAN SYMPOSIUM

ED 371 548

Feeling Bad Can Be Good: Using Dabrowski's Theory to Reframe Gifted Children's Adjustment Difficulties

Sal Mendaglio / William Tillier
The University of Calgary / Calgary Remand Centre

Traditional approaches to the education of the gifted student have focused on cognitive dimensions and have emphasized providing an enriched academic environment. We believe that a more global approach is called for, encompassing the overall personality characteristics and development of the individual. The impact of being gifted is often ambiguous and many with gifted potential fail to achieve as expected. We believe that this may often be due, in part, to the high anxiety and conflict commonly experienced by the gifted and their failure to learn to cope with the negative aspects of their gifts. The Theory of Positive Disintegration, developed by K. Dabrowski, provides a useful framework to conceptualize, understand and assist the gifted student (Dabrowski, 1937; 1964; 1966; 1967; 1970; 1972; 1977; Dabrowski and Piechowski, 1977). This presentation is an overview based upon our understanding of Dabrowski's Theory and our views of its application to the gifted.

Dabrowski's theory presents a multi-dimensional, developmental approach, emphasizing an understanding of the unique potentials of a given individual. Multiple dimensions are assessed, for example; intellect, imagination, emotion, and indicators of the potential for development. A multi-level approach is used to describe the diversity of behaviour and types of personality

EC 303136

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)
This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.
Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.
Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY
J. Lupart
TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC).

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

observed in people. This methodology allows for a differentiation between higher and lower levels of function and their interaction. The result is a more articulate and descriptive theory of personality -a theory particularly applicable to the understanding of the gifted.

A central feature of psychological growth is a series of disintegrations - progressive contradictions and conflicts that arise from a person's experience of life. People often tend to be passive and fail to see these contradictions, allowing their views be formed for them, largely by society. Positive disintegration is a developmental process that calls into question our readily accepted adaptations to life. We come to wonder if our automatic endorsement of society's values is proper. We come to question our basic reactions to things, no longer able to simply accept what we are told or to follow the behaviour of others. We begin to differentiate our attraction to or rejection of objects and goals based upon our own accumulating experience, feelings and conscience. Over time, conflicts produce increasing inhibition, cautiousness and reflection that increasingly influence decisions and behaviour. Behaviour governed by primitive factors (how life is and how I should act based upon my impulses and according to society) diverges into an emerging inner sense of how life could and should be. As this bifurcation intensifies, conflicts and disintegrations become a

fundamental, inevitable and positive component of development.

Conflicts and disintegrations are carefully evaluated to expose potential positive, developmental aspects. When appropriate, emphasis is placed upon helping the person to recognize and accept these difficulties, to see their positive aspects and to learn to cope with society and life.

From Dabrowski's perspective, one critical aspect of developmental potential is an over-excitability in response to stimuli. We believe that over-excitability is a critical driving force in the life of many gifted students, but an ambiguous one, contributing both positive and negative features: positive in that one's perspective of life is enlarged, allowing one to fully appreciate the magnificence and joys of life; negative in that overexcitability can also be extremely upsetting as a great deal of human suffering, injustice and sorrow is clearly brought into focus. This can overwhelm a sensitive student's emotions and may lead to depression, breakdown or even suicide. As these intense perspectives become multi-levelled, they encompass visions of both the lowest, grim reality of life and of the highest, real possibilities of life.

Dabrowski elaborated a hierarchy of five types of overexcitability: psychomotor, sensual, intellectual,

imaginational, and emotional. Emotional overexcitability is at the heart of advanced developmental processes. A person with average excitability tends to experience emotions in social contexts, based upon well defined social roles and expectations. In contrast, the intense experience of emotional overexcitability plays a prominent role in giving a person a very unique and private sense of direction and meaning. The person's unique experience of their emotional and cognitive dynamics stimulates critical self-examination. The learned and often robotic behavior and values we accept so readily from society, instilled by parental and institutional education, come to be questioned and critically evaluated. Through the mechanisms of disintegration, the "what is" of instinct and socialization comes to be rejected and replaced by a growing sense of how life "ought to be". The latter reflects the development of a hierarchy of individualized personal values and the "new", evolving personality of the individual. These changes increasingly ensure that behaviour is authentic and is based upon the individual beliefs and choices of the person.

Dabrowski outlined five levels to describe the process of psychological development. Advanced development begins when the previously socially integrated self of Level I undergoes varying degrees of disintegration, starting with simple, isolated, spontaneous and uncontrollable disintegrations common at level

two. Conflicts at the third level take on a broad vertical nature, reflecting the introduction of higher versus lower, multi-level conflicts. Conflicts begin to wane at level four as development increasingly becomes global, self-directed and organized. At the highest level, a second functional integration occurs. This re-integration is comprised of a critically thinking, autonomous self governed by authentic emotions.

We believe that the gifted, as a group, possess strong intrinsic developmental potential and therefore will also exhibit the accompanying overexcitability, conflicts, disintegrations and reintegrations of advanced development. If this is the case, many gifted students may follow a course of development similar to that outlined above.

Dabrowski advocated a long term, well planned program for each student based upon their unique presentation of potentials, personality and interests. A careful, multidimensional assessment of the student is the first step toward establishing a personalized educational and counselling program. Many of the initial developmental experiences are dominated by conflict, anxiety, self-doubt, fear, feelings of worthlessness, mal-adjustment and depression. Rather than treating these as symptoms to be ameliorated, developmentally focused counselling can assist in coping with these features in a positive and

developmental perspective. The student's personal and academic growth must be facilitated simultaneously, guided by individualized plans overseen by the student, student-mentors, teachers, counsellors and parents.

Dabrowski enlarges upon the traditional, cognitively based approach to the gifted by the inclusion of the developmental and emotional features of the gifted. Similar efforts in this direction are also appearing in the literature, for example, although Dabrowski was not mentioned, Blackburn and Erickson's (1986) views appear very reminiscent of Dabrowski's, including their use of the term "supersensitivity". In addition, Piechowski has developed an approach based upon Dabrowski (Piechowski, 1991).

In conclusion, Dabrowski advocated an individualized educational approach utilizing a developmental counselling perspective. The reframing of the gifted experience and an understanding of both the positive and negative implications of being gifted, minimizes the negative effects of developmental conflicts and encourages psychological adjustment and individualization. This strong foundation, in turn, facilitates cognitive enrichment allowing the gifted to better achieve to their full potential, both academically and as human beings.

REFERENCES:

Blackburn, A. C. & Erickson D. B. (1986). Predictable Crises of the Gifted Student, Journal of Counseling and Development. 64, 552-555.

Dabrowski, K. (1937). Psychological Basis of Self-Mutilation, Genetic Psychology Monographs, 19, 1-104.

Dabrowski, K. (1964). Positive Disintegration. Boston: Little Brown and Co..

Dabrowski, K. (1966). The Theory of Positive Disintegration, International Journal of Psychiatry. 2, 229-244.

Dabrowski, K. (1967). Personality-Shaping Through Positive Disintegration. Boston: Little Brown and Co..

Dabrowski, K., with Kawczak, A., & Piechowski, M. (1970). Mental Growth Through Positive Disintegration. London: Gryf Publications.

Dabrowski, K. (1972). Psychoneurosis Is Not An Illness. London: Gryf Publications.

Dabrowski, K. with Piechowski, M. M. (1977). Theory of Levels of Emotional Development: Volume 1 - Multilevelness And Positive Disintegration. Oceanside, New York: Dabor Science Publications.

Dabrowski, K. & Piechowski, M. M. (1977). Theory of Levels of Emotional Development: Volume 2 - From Primary Integration To Self-Actualization. Oceanside, New York: Dabor Science Publications.

Piechowski, M. M. (1991). Emotional Development and Emotional Giftedness. In N. Colangelo & G. Davis, (Eds.) A Handbook of Gifted Education. (pp. 285-306). Boston: Allyn & Bacon.